[illegible]: Remembering a Poet, William Dickey

PERFORMANCE

A Requiem Lullaby in the Time of AIDS

by Robert Convery, words by Robert Walters, performed by Musica Sacra, conducted by Richard Westenberg.

Alice Tully Hall,
New York City, March 3, 1993.

Reviewed by David Ingham

The program was striking: a close-up of the red ribbon of AIDS awareness against a black background with the words "Stagebill March 1993" printed in white alongside it. Good for Alice Tully Hall, Musica Sacra et al, I thought, for being so upfront about it. I assumed quite naturally that, given the fact that one of the pieces being sung concerned the AIDS experience — Robert Convery's *A Requiem Lullaby in the Time of AIDS* — a portion of the ticket price of $25 was to be donated to one of the numerous AIDS organizations or charitable foundations in New York—GMHC, The Village Nursing Home, In God's Love We Deliver and so on. Alas, no. Inside the program (I refuse to use the new ubiquitous euphemism "stagebill") was an ad explaining the ribbon's significance and how it was merely a promotion for the upcoming AIDS For Life concert at Carnegie Hall on March 14. So we weren't at an AIDS benefit. Shame on Alice Tully Hall, Musica Sacra et al, I thought, for missing an opportunity to help a cause, to help in however small a way to find a cure for this deadly disease. As expected, the choir, musicians and conductor marched on stage sporting their shiny red ribbons. Was this, I feared, an empty gesture, an effort at being "PC"? This would, I decided, rest now on how strong and effective the AIDS piece turned out to be.

The program consisted of lesser known liturgical works by Benjamin Britten and two pieces by Mr. Convery — the *Lullaby* and a setting of James Joyce's "Springsong of the Earth" (Molly Bloom's famous speech at the end of *Ulysses*). Well, if you weren't asleep before the *Lullaby*, having sat, or should I say slouched, through several soporifically lush and tedious Britten pieces, the *Lullaby* would have done the trick. It goes I think without saying that a lullaby should put the baby not the audience to sleep. Like Mr. Britten in the earlier pieces, Mr. Covery appears to have been seduced by the potential for lushness in the choral medium. He conveyed little or none of the grief, sadness and protest of Mr. Walter's sensitive and obviously sincere poem. The music alternated between a kind of New Age dreaminess and a Stravinskyesque staccato agitation, neither of which captured the depth of feeling in the words. Cynthia Richards-Hewes' soprano solos showed her pure, clear tone to good effect; she did her best with the material at hand, as did the choir. But neither they nor Mr. Walter's verses could rescue the piece from insipidity. Even the poem did not get across the range of complex and often, surely, conflicting, emotions of a mother whose child has AIDS (especially guilt, anger, ambivalence and pre-mourning; and I'm only using intelligent guesswork here being myself a man; perhaps by the way a woman composer and/or poet might have done a better job?). The piece was altogether too restrained and concert-hallish. It reminded me very much of many of the songs in the *AIDS Quilt Songbook,* which I reviewed for this magazine last June. Similarly, the poems were quite strong but the music was safe and bland and above all not moving to the listener.

Mr. Convery's other piece bore even less relation to the text than the *Lullaby.* He caught neither the sexiness nor exoticism of the "Springsong" text. Where Spanish nights or the charm of the Irish landscape were evoked in the text, no equivalent musical references were applied by the composer. Convery failed to capture any of the quasi orgasmic build-up of Molly's monologue. One couldn't help wondering furthermore why anyone would feel compelled to set to music a piece of writing which is in itself a tour de force of musical pyrotechnics.

Musica Sacra is a polished, experienced and versatile choir ably conducted by one of the master's of choral music. It seems a pity that they should waste their efforts on such innocuous stuff. Only one of the pieces moved me—Britten's setting of a fourteenth century Hymn to the Virgin in which part of the choir sang off stage giving a touching and delicate echo effect.

I left the hall thinking that contemporary composers might do well to let their hearts rather than their music school training dictate their notes—notes of wrath, of deep compassion, of sorrowing, of lighthearted yet not superficial humor, and of heartfelt tenderness. I fear that a number of artists these days are "jumping on the AIDS bandwagon," either to advance their careers, to be trendy, or to give some of them their due, to say "something" to draw attention to the "problem." Those of us who suffer from the disease, care deeply about those who have it, and want above all to help find a cure are still awaiting moving and deeply felt musical expression of the emotional havoc and drastic changes the disease has created in our lives. With the exception of John Corigliano's AIDS Symphony — reviewed in this issue by Christopher Purdy — and the works of Diamanda Galás, few if any such expressions have reached the concert hall stage so far. Composers and librettists beseech your muses, pick up your pens. ❖

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THEATER

The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me

written and performed by David Drake, directed by Chuck Brown, Perry Street Theatre, New York City.

Reviewed by Christopher Hewitt

David Drake's one man show is an actor's *tour de force.* In a series of flashbacks and vignettes he traces his autobiographical journey from his childhood in a small town in the repressive Fundamentalist South to his coming out as a gay man in New York City, to his gay life in The Big Apple — cruising, discos and all — to his involvement in the AIDS cause as an activist and finally projecting us into his future life at the turn of the coming century.

Mr. Drake is an excellent actor with a compelling stage presence. He is an accomplished and often brilliant writer. The scenes where his talents as writer and performer fuse best are comedic. Here the play is insightful, wonderfully theatrical and touchingly human. As a child, Drake buys his mother an album by The Village People (!). At this point he mimes the various singers and then returns to look at the album cover and declares in a wonderful moment of discovery: "You're all fairies!" In the gym he is working out on an exercise machine when another guy demands to use it. Drake suddenly stops his frantic deep-throated grunting and with a high-pitched feminine "Sure" surrenders the machine. Anyone who saw Drake in *Pageant* or *Vampire Lesbians of Sodom* will attest to Drake's talents as a comedian.

At moments of high drama, he is less convincing. This may also be a fault of the writing however. At times the whole thing became rather self-indulgent and hazy in its message. The disco scenes — screams, raucous singing, poppers, unsafe sex, etc. — would have been more powerful if less abrasive and less long. The slogan "less is more" comes to mind; director Chuck Brown might have "directed down" here. At one point Drake runs a knife (mercifully but visibly blunted with Scotch tape) over his bare chest in time to the music. It was unclear whether this was supposed to be a comment on S&M as internalized homophobia or merely a kind of desperate eroticism — a substitute for intimacy and self-love. In any case it came across as rather narcissistic and exhibitionist.

Towards the end of the play there is a powerful scene in which Drake, mourning his friends and acquaintances who have died of AIDS, is set against a starlit sky and lights candles for those who have died. Here Drake describes himself as one of a "thousand points of light" who care about those dying of the disease and are fighting for a cure. Bush's catchphrase, much maligned by activists and leftwingers and rightly so, is said without a trace of irony. If taken "straight" this might mean something like "gay activists are points of light too." If so, the comment is weak and politically spurious. If the reference is unconscious (it can't be surely?) then Mr. Drake had better take a crash course in eighties history.

At times, it was hard to tell if Drake was supposed to be in character or whether he was merely playing a "sample gay man." It would have been easier to identify with the material and given more cohesion to the piece if Drake had appeared more unpretentiously and relaxedly himself as in the final scene. Also, we never learn what he does for a living (he's an actor, right? but then again...). If he had portrayed himself more clearly as an actor in New York City he might have included an audition scene for example which would have given him further opportunity to show off his brilliant comedic talents and make some political statements about prejudice, AIDS phobia, etc.

The final scene, set on New Year's Eve 1999, offers some hope and blessed light relief. Drake tells us that by then we will see the "outing of Siskel and Ebert" and that a cure will have been found for AIDS, although the Government will withhold its release for political reasons. Many more gays are now holding political office we are told but there have been riots and killings of AIDS activists. The title of the play derives from Drake's having seen Larry Kramer's play *The Normal Heart* and his being inspired (kissed) by it to become an activist. In his play too, Drake is saying that we must continue to fight for gay rights, for a cure for AIDS, and for more compassion and caring for AIDS patients. His piece, much of which is magical and moving, makes you want to do just that. ❖

Pictured: DAVID DRAKE in *The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me*

Photo Credit: Martha Swope Associates: William Gibson

Photo Credit: Buck Ennis

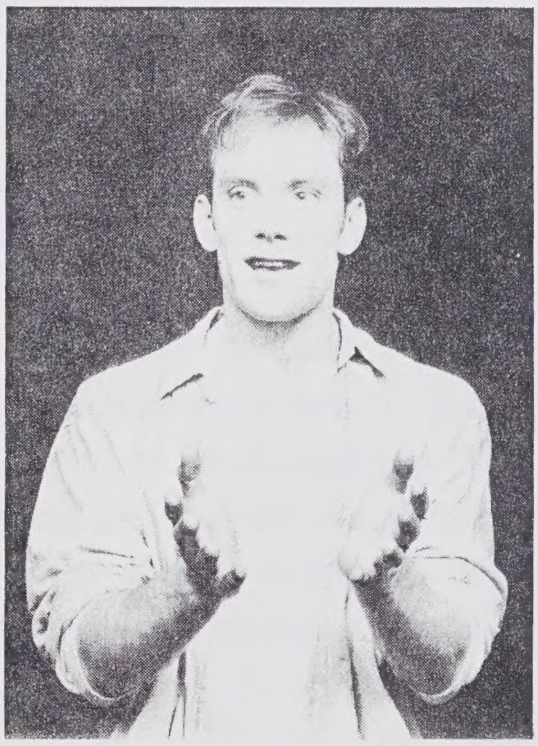

Photo Credit: Michael Wakefield

Review: *Chroma* by Derek Jarman
(The Overlook Press, 1995)

This is a scholarly book by the British innovative film-maker, but don't be intimidated. It's also a fascinating collage of thoughts on color - a mixture of philosophers' reflections (from Aristotle to Wittgenstein), artists' treatises (Melevich, Kandinsky, even Alberti the architect) and Jarman's own autobiographical narrative. On page nineteen in a chapter on White called "White Lies," Jarman suddenly speaks of the disease which ended his life last year:

> "In the first whole light of dawn I turn white as a sheet, as I swallow the white pills to keep me alive ... attacking the virus which is destroying my white blood cells."

Anyone who has suffered a catastrophic illness, or experienced the shock of the death of a friend will have experienced the startling brightness of colors, the changes in the perception of the world around him. Jarman, obviously as a film-maker, an intensely visual person, began life as a painter at the prestigious Slade School in London. Anyone who has seen his movies, for example "Blue" or Edward II" will have noticed the importance of color in his films which gives them a special dream-like quality.

Really this book is a meditation on the colors of the spectrum. Jarman appears almost to be free-associating on his subject - a stream of consciousness poem which is often fascinating to read and at other times so dense and intense as to be rather a "bombardment" on the senses. I recommend just relaxing and letting the words, the colors wash over you; one is tempted to say "Get high and then read the book." Perhaps that's a little extreme but as with Kandinsky's paintings, which at first glance make no sense at all, the only way to see them in all their "truth" is to let them "impact" on you. The way to read the book is to mentally "inhale" it. Trying to "make sense" of it makes no sense. It's not a thesis on color for an art history Ph.D. But profound it certainly is. And to the sick man this book can be healing emotionally and psychologically. It can take him into an abstract realm of color, unattached, for the most part, to objects. It's a distillation of past life – a dream memory of what has stood out as important to the author. Having read this book, you see the world clearer and more joyously.

Interview with William Parker

> **"I think that the Songbook is an invitation to people to look more closely at AIDS. Some of it is gruff stuff—there are night sweats and all the throwing up but then there are some beautiful jive pieces, a sort of saluting a friend who has gone."**

Chris Hewitt: Tell me, first of all, how you came to start this? Were you the one who started the *AIDS Quilt Songbook?* Who actually began the idea?

William Parker: It was me. I was sitting in Santa Fe and having lived with AIDS for almost four years when this purple Kaposi started to appear. I sort of felt like the pregnant girl coming back home. It started to show and they are going to ask questions and you'd better fess up. So, I remember reading a piece about the *Corigliano Symphony*. I thought, the Design industry, the Dance world, the Symphony world, now, have all done their bit. What's the matter with our singers? Why, for vocalists, we've been very unvocal. Any singer has sung about tragic things, whether it be opera alone or the whole realm of the song category — death, departure, deception, illness — all those old things. Why can't we sing about something contemporary and lethal and now?

CH: Why the notion of an AIDS Quilt for a musical performance?

WP: The notion of an AIDS patch-work quilt is a very good one. It's a songbook. The year 1992 is there for a purpose, though. Hopefully, three or four years down the road, there will be another songbook. I was kind of picky this time — to have them all set for baritones. It could be for soprano, alto, base or whatever.

CH: How difficult was it to get the involvement of a diverse group of composers?

WP: I couldn't believe the generosity of the composers involved. Bill Bolcom agreed, and had it to me in a week. John Harbison couldn't wait to work on the project. Others have been a little bit slower, for various reasons. The Muse, as you know, does not like to be kicked around — she's fickle. The idea was that, not even all of these composers represent musical styles that I am always at home with. I think that's sort of my point about it being a musical quilt.

CH: How did the composers go about choosing the poems that they are going to set to music?

WP: It was up to them. I suggested the book *Poets for Life.*

CH: You didn't make it mandatory. You said that's a good place to start.

WP: Yes, except that it had to do with AIDS. Harbison was the only one that sneaked under the wire with that requirement. His song is so beautiful, and the poem so moving, that we took it anyway

CH: Where do you think this is going to go? Do you have other engagements planned out for the future?

WP: I do — one in San Francisco for sure and hopefully another in Los Angeles. People are scoring bids in San Francisco. New Orleans has expressed interest as well as Rochester and Berlin — where we did the first song cycle. Because the songbook is constructed like a quilt, you can take it apart and move them around. If you only have an hour spot on the program then you do eleven songs. If you have an hour and a half, then you do all eighteen or twenty. That's what it's intended to be. Flexible.

CH: The performance at Lincoln Center... who is benefitting?

WP: The AIDS Resource Center is the parent organization that funds Bailey House. Baily House is a place where men, women and children with AIDS can find shelter. A place to live. Imagine having AIDS and being homeless at the same time. It's to them that we want the profits from the event to benefit. The publishing and recording profits will also go to Bailey House.

CH: Is there anything else you want to say about it?

WP: Well, I think that the Songbook is an invitation to people to look more closely at AIDS. Some of it is gruff stuff — there are night sweats and all the throwing up and there is some pretty rough material in the Songbook. But then there are some beautiful jive pieces, a sort of saluting a friend who has gone.

CH: Can you talk a little bit about the individual pieces? Just tell us a little bit about some of them and about the ones you are going to sing.

WP: *Dasvedanya Mama.* Ethyl Eichelberger was a great figure. I only saw him once. He was a hysterically funny drag artist. *Dasvedanya Mama* is taken from one of his monologues. It's a jazzy, cheeky kind of piece. I wish it was twice as long. Elizabeth Brown's *A Certain Light* is a shocking piece of poetry by Marie Howe. In the New York Times last Sunday, Marie's poem finished the end of that article on AIDS. This is about her brother. It involves all the nasty, nasty, nasty parts of someone's final decline and death. But then at the end of the poem, the man they are writing about, looks at the couple at his bedside and asks: "How do I look? Am I all right." Chris De Blasio's *Walt Whitman in 1989* is a terrific piece of poetry. Walt's come down now, not to a Civil War casualty ward, but to an AIDS ward. He takes these young men dying in his arms in a flat boat down the long river. It's a beautiful piece.

CH: You said earlier that some of the music isn't what you would necessarily choose but that you thought it was important to involve a wide range of musical styles, to really in effect create a musical quilt of styles and tastes.

WP: That's true. Fred Hersch is a Jazz musician. He asked to be on the menu here, and wrote a text called *Blues for an Imaginary Valentine.* He was thinking, oh, to have a long time companion, and to die in his arms, but "wait a minute, wouldn't you be abandoning your partner?" I said, "that's terrible. I wouldn't want to abandon someone like that." It's a very complicated but interesting piece. Richard Wilson took Steven Sandy's poem *The Second Law of Aerodynamics.* It's rigorous modern music, but it's good. It's a piece about how the element of heat is so important. The narrator is holding the hand of someone who is dying and the hand is very cold. He says "oh God, am I getting through? I'm not sure." So he goes to the nurse's station, gets a cup of hot coffee, warms up his hand and then takes the patient's hand again. "Now, now I should be getting through..." There are glimmers of hope here and there. It's a great combined effort to show that we care and are responding. We've created, I think, a permanent work of art documenting what we think about AIDS in 1992 and also a way to channel money to persons with AIDS. We feel very good about the whole exercise. I think the old saw about the giver really getting the best gift, it's true.

CH: Okay. Thanks a lot. ❖

Photograph of William Parker courtesy of John Gingrich Management, Inc.

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One More For The Quilt

For Seth Allen

by Edward Field

The last time we talked on a street corner
(we were always meeting on street corners)
you said you were on your way to the doctor,
there was something wrong with your throat —
it was the day rehearsals were starting
for the Broadway show, your big break.
Our friends are dying around us,
and all of us left behind
are awestruck with the horror of it.
What, Lord, do you have in mind?
Have mercy on us.

That day, I took your hand in mine —
so warm and fleshy, full of high energy,
like the hands of a woman I worked for
who had cured herself of cancer. With those hands
I can hardly believe you couldn't
cure yourself of anything.
Though worried, you didn't in the least
have the look of someone about to die.
To the end, you were always ready for laughter,
even when you had a right to cry,
Lord, have mercy on us.

Sassy in print, Seth, your talent flowered anywhere —
on stage at La Mama you gave Caligula's speech
standing on the shoulders of two barechested hunks.
You never even wobbled — what balance,
defying gravity as you did in your life.
You were one of those who didn't need
the sexual revolution — you always went
all the way. No part of you was a prude.
The pleasure-loving, the boldest,
are disappearing from our midst,
And we who somehow still survive
can only beg, Don't take the best,
Lord, have mercy on us.

Strange, how much we talk about you, gone.
Even your dying didn't bring us down —
for you were one of those who added
to the store of gaiety on earth, the fun.
But even as memory tempers grief,
the rest of us keep pondering
that someone so full of life could die,
while we, for the moment, remain alive —
awestruck by your brief,
brilliant flash across the sky:

Lord, have mercy on us.

From *Counting Myself Lucky* (Black Sparrow, 1992)

It had to aim for a kind of Wallace Stevens monotone. A little bit pickled. It was really horrible to understand. In fact, you weren't supposed to. It was considered "low class" to make yourself understood. My style of reading was considered very "low class".

CH: You were really lucky to make sense.

EF: But then I like my poems to make sense.

CH: Do you enjoy reading?

EF: Not terribly, no. I'm embarrassed by that. Every time I read, I cry. I know you shouldn't cry when you read. I studied acting. I was an actor. My teacher used to say, "Actor cries buckets, audience goes to sleep. Actor withholds tears, and audience weeps." And it's true. You really should, as a performer, withhold your tears, and I don't like to read, because my poems are too personal. I don't like to reveal myself. I am very shy. Even though, when I write I'm private, in the privacy of my room I write and I can put anything down on paper. As soon as I go on stage, there I am revealing all this intimate stuff, and I'm embarrassed. I'm really not as open as I'd like to be. Even my book, when I look at my poems I say, "Oh my god, should I publish this about myself?"

CH: Do you feel naked? Do you feel exposed?

EF: Very naked. That's why I grew a moustache.

CH: It looks nice.

EF: Thanks.

CH: Do you think people read too much sometimes? That there's a kind of overexposure of poets? There are a lot of poets in New York who are always giving readings.

EF: Yes, but not everybody goes to every reading.

CH: That's true.

EF: It's a good idea to memorize my poems also. It makes my reading much more of a performance.

CH: One thing I've felt reading your work is that you really are such an "American" poet.

EF: Well, actually, I've always felt *not American.*

CH: Why?

EF: My parents were immigrants from Eastern Europe. And I grew up as a Jew and was told to "go back to my own country" all the time. I grew up feeling that I didn't belong. Of course, maybe that makes me "American".

CH: I think that's what makes you American.

EF: Yes, well, after all, it's a country of minorities. More and more, actually.

CH: You write lots about alienation and loneliness.

EF: That's where the title of *Counting Myself Lucky* comes from. I actually do feel lucky just to have survived. ❖

The Scream

by Edward Field

AIDS IS GERM WARFARE AGAINST
HOMOSEXUALS
screamed the poster, pasted up around the city,
probably hand-printed in a cellar by some certifiable
crazy
making connections, out of a terrible clarity of mind,
like the revolving red flashes of alarm
of a police car careening through the streets —

CIA PLOT... KENNEDY ASSASSINATION...
PENTAGON...
FUNDAMENTALISTS... SECRET LABS...
BIOLOGICAL
ENGINEERING... EQUATORIAL AFRICA...
HUMAN GUINEA PIGS,
it cries,

and all it took was a few
doctored poppers sold at bathhouses
in New York and San Francisco,
and in no time, sexual freedom
and its easy pleasures,
gone,

not to mention, the poorer and darker populations,
and as a bonus, drug addicts.

It's crackpot, of course, hard to believe
anyone was loony, or criminal, enough, to manufacture
this virus, much less release it among us.
More likely, it's only nature's latest attempt
to reduce the population, in which case
it doesn't matter who gets it in the neck
or how it spreads.

But why then did they have to arrest the poster man
and put him away for saying what he believed was true,
and might have been, for all we know?
Why silence him? Is it comforting
that there aren't any more posters now, accusing
those we know to be our enemies
of being our assassins?

Crazy he may be, and the Pentagon and the CIA
innocent as babes, but the poster's scream
of pain and paranoia is in its essence true —
there's been a war between man and microbe
from the beginning. And whether AIDS
is some kind of secret plot or not,
we must stand up with the poster man
and, as thousands die, refuse to be silenced,
scream from the rooftops:

AIDS IS GERM WARFARE AGAINST
HUMANITY.

From *Counting Myself Lucky* (Black Sparrow, 1992)

norities might be writing about.

EF: And if the editors get them, they reject them. They reject my political poems. They've accepted very few.

CH: Out of fear, do you think, or prejudice? They just don't expect poems to be political. Is that it?

EF: They don't want them to be. It embarrasses them. Anything personal embarrasses them. They are scared of gay poetry, anyway. You know that there are some places that say they are loosening up. Then I send something with the word "fuck" in it or a reference to gay life and, of course, it's not accepted. Now maybe they're a little looser, but they still won't publish anything really vital.

CH: Do you think we need more outlets for gay poetry or poetry for non-whites or whatever?

EF: I think it's happening. New magazines will come out. I don't think the old places will be reformed. They belong to the academy; they belong to the establishment. There is a whole movement in Southern California that I wrote an essay about in *Poets & Writers* called the Long Beach School. There's hope there. It's a vernacular poetry like the AIDS poetry. This other school, far away from the Northeast, is away from the establishment and the publishing houses. It's a very grungy school too. That's a possibility. I think they'd be very sympathetic to publishing gay poets. Maybe a little guide has to be published to let gay poets know about them.

CH: You might get rejected in the Northeast, not because your poetry is bad, but because of the subject matter, though you'd never know for sure. You couldn't prove it.

EF: My poems get rejected all the time. Nine out of ten poems, used to be ninety nine out of one hundred. It's very hard to get through to those bastards.

CH: What do you think of the "poetry slam" phenomenon?

EF: What's that?

CH: You don't know what "poetry slamming" is?

EF: No.

CH: They have these competitions where people get up to do this performance poetry, and the audience rates them. They have national competitions where they "slam" one off against the other. I like it, because it's getting stuff out to the people. A lot of it is not very good, and I'm a little leery that the performance counts more than the poetry. Nevertheless, people are going to hear poetry in huge numbers.

EF: Another thing is that in the old days the style of your reading had to be very "gay."

The Veteran

by Edward Field

Even before the fear of blackmail and police,
being beaten up, strapped in for shock, and worse,
the humiliation of being dragged whimpering into
the open,

the boyscout manual promised
that it would drive you crazy,
which didn't keep me from uncontrollable
beating off under the covers.

The army kept showing a film of chancre sores,
raw meat penises, rotten tongues held out with
forceps,
a guy who could only whisper hoarsely
for us not to make the mistake he did —
and a million times I was convinced
I caught something in every sneaky sex act.

Oh, the heart-sinking disgust
of coming up with a crab-louse in the tweezers,
pale legs in slow motion.

How could it not have come, then, to this,
the ultimate punishment of AIDS, an inner voice
argues—
even while good sense says it's just a disease,
not a moral judgement.

Caught in crystal like a prehistoric insect
that lived but never quite flew,
the mineral hardening around him,
it's with regret, but truthfully also relief,
that this old veteran—masturbator, midnight
stalker —
fed up with it from a lifetime of guilt and worry,
can at last take his discharge,
and put sex away, probably forever.

From *Counting Myself Lucky* (Black Sparrow, 1992)

CH: Do you find that it's a difficult subject to write about?

EF: I don't "try" to write about anything. It's just what I write about.

CH: For instance, I think "The Scream" is a very political poem, and I, personally, find political poems very hard to write.

EF: I've written a lot of political poems and, lately, more and more. I feel what I write should be on the Op-Ed page of *The New York Times*, but when I sent them one of my political poems, which I think is perfectly appropriate for the space, it got rejected. I've just sent them another one that I just wrote. About a wish — a kind of "wish poem" — that Clinton would declare a five minute period of silence a year as a memorial for AIDS. I've just sent it off to them and I think it should be there, but they don't take poetry seriously.

CH: Do you think that poets can really change anything?

EF: No, not at all, but you try anyway.

CH: Do you think poetry has become less of a force for good than it used to be? Or has it always been on the fringes of power? Has it ever had much force to do anything?

EF: I think an adolescent understands instinctively or rather senses that poetry has a force — a power for change. Poetry to an adolescent is something different than to a professional poet. I try not to forget what poetry was for me — my vision of poetry — when I was a kid. That's very different from what poetry is in the poetry world. If you read *Poetry* or *American Poetry Review*, different poets write for different people. I can never see poetry as aimed at an academic audience, intellectual audience or poetry audience. I write poetry for ordinary people.

CH: One thing I love about your poetry is that your language is so clear and unpretentious and straight forward. You don't use a lot of big words, but you get your meaning across.

EF: I used to cut out any word which wasn't colloquial. You find all kinds of literary words creeping in. I used to just take them out and use a perfectly ordinary word. But now I write prose too. I find that I have to put in fancier words. It gets boring writing that simple language. It gets monotonous to use those simple words.

CH: One thing we've found at *Art & Understanding* that's so wonderful, although AIDS is a horrendous disease, is that so much good poetry is being written about AIDS. It seems almost as if the difficulty of the disease and the horrible nature of it has made people feel so much that they've been forced to write poems out of need, rather than choice. They have to write them. I make an analogy to the World War I poems in England. You read about the war, because you had to. The level of the poetry was very good. People had hardly written poems before, and that's what we're getting. We're receiving a lot of good poetry from people who've not written very much before.

EF: I think it's bringing poetry back to what it should be. Did you hear my reading at The Pink Triangle? My voice was getting spent, because I kept crying. So I don't really write anything which doesn't make me cry. AIDS is a subject you can't write about without weeping. Most poetry, let's face it, you read it in *The New Yorker*, and it's very urbane. Nobody is showing their vulnerability. Nobody is embarrassing themselves. It's everybody being "professional." It's very skillful. The level of modern poetry is incredible, but it doesn't mean a thing. I thought at The Pink Triangle Conference reading that the young people, usually black, gay, HIV+, were marvelous. That is the cutting edge of poetry today. All the other stuff is just the bullshit.

CH: I agree. It's interesting. I read some critic's article in *American Poetry Review* in which they said no political poetry is being written anymore. What they meant was that no straight, white poetry is being written which is political, which may be true, but it never even occurred to them what gays might be writing about, for instance, or what mi-

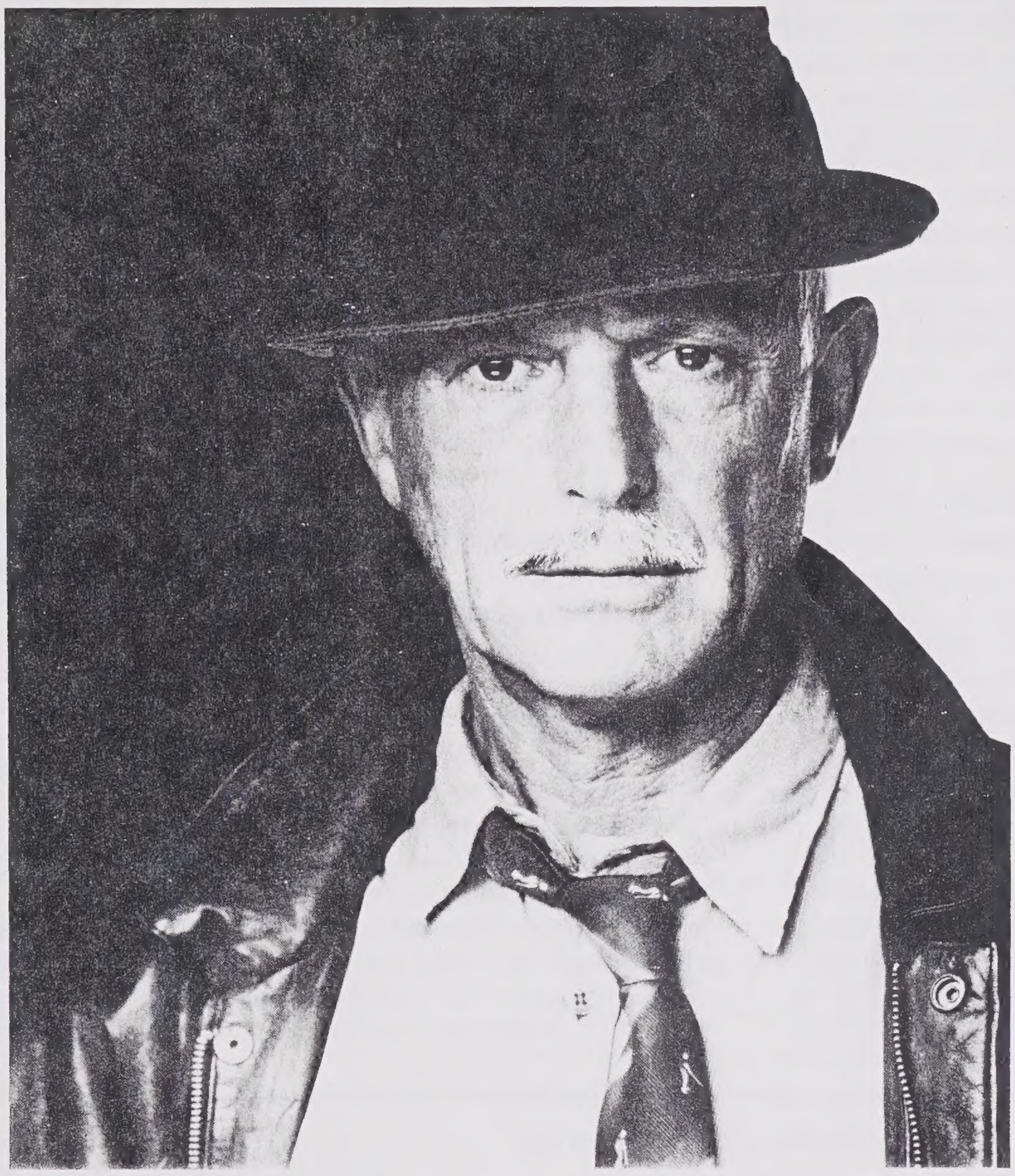

Photo of Poet Edward Field by Becker Logan

Interview with Edward Field

Christopher Hewitt: You have a new book out, *Counting Myself Lucky: Selected Poems 1963-1992.* Tell me about it.

Edward Field: The new poem section is over half the book. I have this tremendous output of work.

CH: Why is that?

EF: I think AIDS has a lot to with it. Because turning the images away from sex and even sex fantasies, because even the fantasies are inhibitive.

CH: I'm going to turn this recorder around. You have rather a soft voice and I have a loud voice.

EF: You have a declarative voice...

CH: Well, that's a polite way of putting it.

EF: All my British friends do. I have a friend, Diana Advil, who is an editor. Wonderful, forceful, forthright voice.

CH: They can hear her several blocks away.

EF: That's why you are so good on the stage.

CH: I suppose so. I've been fascinated by your use of language. Do you think your style has changed over the years?

EF: No, not very much at all. I suddenly hit upon it when I first started writing in my twenties, and it's been with me all this time. It feels the same to me, anyway. I'm sure it's changed.

CH: Now, we're publishing three of your poems about AIDS. Can you talk about those?

EF: "The Veteran."

CH: Yes.

EF: That's my reaction to... well, I've had a long life. I'm in my late sixties now, and actually I've had a full sex life, so for me I don't think it's such a tragedy to have that curtailed. I do feel sorry for those who have to face that, having to put it under a dish, which I think is a terrible thing to have to do to sex.

CH: And "The Scream."

EF: Yes, and "The Scream." There used to be this freak who put up these posters in New York City stating that AIDS was a CIA plot and a war on homosexuals. It really made a lot of sense. Whether it was true or not, it made a lot of sense. I did hear that they found him and put him away. Why isn't this talked about? So I wrote a poem about it. The other one ["One More For The Quilt"] is a memorial to my friend, Seth Allen. A wonderful actor, who was in "A Lisbon Traviata," before he died. It was very sad. Because of his success in a "A Lisbon Traviata," he got a Broadway part, and that's when it was discovered that he had AIDS. He was a wonderful person and a marvelous actor. I tried to make the poem a very formal poem, not at all like I usually write. I wanted it to look like a traditional memorial — not in the shape, but in spirit.

CH: Have you lost a lot of friends to the disease?

EF: Not many close ones, but my friends are dying from old age. Also, so it's not just AIDS which is the grim reaper.

FILM

The Living End: "an irresponsible movie"

written/directed/shot/edited by Greg Arakis. At the Angelika Film Center, New York, NY

Reviewed by Michael Anthony Thomas

"Fuck the World," reads the spray-painted opening image of the low-budget independent film, *The Living End*. Those words could also be the motto of Luke, the hunky, self-destructive sociopath who writes them. After a series of run-ins with various denizens of L.A., including a jealous wife sporting a pill-box hat and a very big knife, and two murderous lesbians in a red convertible (one of whom is played by B-movie favorite Mary Woronov), Luke is eventually threatened by three would-be fagbashers. He shoots them dead. In desperation, he flags down a passing car driven by Jon, a fledgling writer who has just found out that he is HIV positive. Jon asks if there's somewhere he can drop Luke, who responds, "Yeah! Off this insane fuckin' planet!"

Insane it is, as scenes of graphic violence are interlaced with flip dialogue and visual jokes, punctuated by Metal and Post-Punk on the soundtrack. But Luke himself is on a less-than-even keel, with a hot head and an itchy trigger finger; a dangerous combination which makes it all the more puzzling that the otherwise sane Jon (Craig Gilmore) would eventually fall for him. This is, in fact, the big hole at the center of this otherwise smart debut film by Greg Arakis. Certainly no first film is without its flaws, but Arakis displays enough talent and attitude to keep our attention through some of the muddier, unformed aspects of this "irresponsible movie," as he himself bills it.

More importantly, and what ultimately carries the day, is Arakis' unfettered rage, a scarce commodity for filmmakers in these measured times. His target is the madness of contemporary life, and he lingers frequently on televised scenes of carnage: both the brutal carnage of senseless murder, and the "civilized" carnage of the operating room. No, this is not a movie for the faint of heart, but neither, according to Arakis, are the times we live in.

To Arakis, the most blatant example of this madness is the AIDS epidemic. Jon is not the only HIV positive character in the film. When Luke comes on to him, Jon informs him of his status. "Welcome to the club," says Luke, and so begins their wrong-headed romance. After Luke shoots a cop (we do not see this scene, nor do we ever learn what provokes the deed), the two set out on the lam with a stolen credit card and a bottle of Jack Daniels.

This is a road movie for the disillusioned, with plenty of talk about how to live (or decide not to live) with a potential death sentence, and rage, rage, rage against the Republicanism of the last twelve years. Luke (Played by Mike Dytri) fantasizes about injecting his and Jon's blood into George Bush's veins. "Wanna bet they'd have the magic cure by tomorrow?" he muses. This is almost predictable once you get the movie's point of view, but the ambivalence of the two characters about the value of life-after-diagnosis is not. It is ultimately as unsettling as the abundant bloodletting.

Unfortunately, Arakis hasn't yet found a way to get consistent performances from his actors. Gilmore is appealing as Jon, but his character isn't fully realized by Arakis' sometimes awkward writing. ("It's all like a quasi-dream within a dream. Like I've fallen through the looking glass, never to return," says Jon.) Hence, Gilmore and the other performers are sometimes at sea, but a writer/director's ability to develop believable characters and dialogue is something that can be cultivated. Arakis has made a promising start.

This film was made with the help of an American Film Institute grant, which is partly funded by the National Endowment for the Arts. But is it politically correct, you ask? Well, a nice disease-of-the week TV-movie it ain't. The movie ends with a dedication to people who have died of AIDS, blaming a "White House full of Republican f—ckheads." This is a film that will either leave you invigorated or have you running for the next showing of *Enchanted April* as an antidote.

MUSIC

When We No Longer Touch

by Kristopher Ian Anthony, poetry by Peter McWilliams: The Turtle Creek Chorale, AmFAR Records.

CD reviewed by David Ingham.

The title piece and main work on this new CD is a requiem for a dead lover. The "I" voice of the poems is sung alternately by the all male chorale and a series of fine soloists (sadly unnamed on the liner notes) and interestingly and touchingly interspersed with the Latin (short form) of the requiem mass.

What is especially appealing here is the universality: because the soloists are sometimes female and the poems are addressed to a "you" with no specific gender reference, the relationship referred to could have been straight or gay (male or female). Each section of the requiem also has a title borrowed presumably from Kübler-Ross's book on the various stages of the grieving process, for example Denial, Anger etc. This idea is obviously well intentioned but seems rather contrived and superimposed on the text — in the liner notes these titles are awkwardly positioned so that we are not sure what is title or text (a C- to the art director also for designing the cover so that the names of the performers and the titles of the pieces are partly illegible). All that aside, the music is quite beautiful and the performances stunning.

Mr. Anthony's setting is lyrical and tender — perhaps best described as a cross between New Romanticism and a kind of neo-Impressionism. The excellent use of cello and oboe obligato adds textual interest and excitement. There is a compelling urgency in the Dies Ires and a gentle poignancy in the Lacrimosa — the words and music meld perfectly here.

The Chorale is splendidly conducted by Dr. Timothy Seeling and is everything you would want from a male chorus: a rare jewel-like precision and unity of sound, virtuoso dynamics and an overall nobility and control.

Lovely and moving as the music is, one can't help wishing that Mr. Anthony had chosen a better text. Peter McWilliam's language is often dull, verging on the banal, and is devoid of images and descriptions which might have rescued the poetry from slipping into sentimentality—deep feelings are one thing, sappiness is another. There is much wonderful poetry being currently written on the AIDS and HIV experience, for example in the anthologies *The Road Before Us* and *Poets For Life*. This reviewer would be intrigued and delighted if Mr. Anthony were to set some poems from such books and no doubt his prospective audience would be too.

In the meantime, watch out for other work by Kristopher Ian Anthony, further recordings by The Turtle Creek Chorale and buy this excellent CD for your collection. ❖

Tribute

Remembering a Poet, William Dickey

Photo by Rebecca Radner

AFTER A LONG and distinguished career, the poet and teacher William Dickey died on May 3, 1994. In 1959, a selection of his work compiled by the poet W.H. Auden entitled *Of The Festivity* won him that year's place in the Yale Series of Younger Poets. The fifth of his fifteen books, *The Rainbow Grocery*, received the Juniper Prize; *The King of The Golden River* received the Bay Area Book Reviewers Award for Poetry; he won many further awards, including the California Silver Medal for Poetry. Most recently, his *In The Dreaming: Selected Poems* was published by the University of Arkansas Press.

The San Francisco Examiner wrote of his memoir in *Life Sentences: Writers, Artists, and AIDS*: "...In 'Last Time,' a graceful elegy that should become one of the classics of the literature inspired by the plague, Dickey finds some solace even in the bewildering strangeness that follows the loss of immunity." Here, Dickey speaks of crossing borders, and finding the country at the other side—one more humane, where all individuals are included, are entrusted with choice.

William Dickey's poems endlessly open toward the beauty and terror, the possibility of experience—a generosity that is conveyed in both his life and work. We experience his delight in all things sensual, his envisioning of the space for greater physical and emotional communion, his enlarging of the sexual arena, his wry and generous wit, and lately, his anger. A mature anger directed against forces which would undermine an ability to choose—whether that choice is love, and the partner of that love, or the inviolability of the body.

Despite his illness, Bill continued to work, to communicate against inertia—his life was invested in speaking truthfully. And Auden first noted this, saying his work showed "the first power essential to poetry, the power to speak." The power to bridge separation.

—Thomas Avena

For Bill Dickey

In memoriam

by Christopher Hewitt

Though you were known
as the Great Teacher,
I was never afraid of you.
You might recommend
that I cut the first three
stanzas of a poem. I'd agree.
It would be as if scales had fallen
from my eyes. Of course! That
was it! "Never apologize for
your subject matter," you'd
say. "Bring the poem out of
the poem." Even regarding my
worst efforts, you'd say, with
one eyebrow raised, "There's a
poem here *somewhere*. A poem
is like a kite. You have to hold
onto the string. To anchor the poem
in the real world." You're no longer
anchored, Bill, and we have to let
go of the string. I watch the poem of
you fly higher, higher over the
ocean of faces of us, your former
students, who chant thank-yous
to you in the foggy Pacific morning,
over San Francisco Bay.
If I look hard enough,
I can still see you
smiling down at us.

-

WILLIAM DICKEY taught poetry writing at San Francisco State University for many years. As a man and as a poet, Dickey was a role model for many, especially his students of whom I was fortunate enough to be one, in the 1970's. Dickey came out as a gay man at the age of fifty and as a result his poetry changed. From being rather conventional and academic, his work became more honest, clearer and more humorous. In *The Rainbow Grocery* (University of Massachusetts Press) Dickey showed his openness to his new life, his tenderness and compassion for others and his surrealistic sense of humor. He was a wonderful poet and a versatile one (see the poems "The Weather of This World" and "Dancer IV" in this issue of *Art & Understanding*); as a man, he was quiet, unassuming and wry.

He was the best teacher of creative writing I ever had (and I had twenty one teachers in three writers' programs). He could be rigorously honest and yet encourage you enormously. He knew how to edit brilliantly. He was the only man I ever completely trusted with a blue pencil when reading my poems. He encouraged you to be yourself poetically, never demanding that you write in a certain style, or, like so many other writing teachers, like himself. His ability to make you laugh at the infelicities in your work and encourage you to celebrate its strengths, was what endeared us to him.

Last Christmas I had talked with Bill at the Cafe Flore in San Francisco in the heart of the Castro Street area. I knew he was HIV + but I had no idea he had such a short time left to him. Fortunately for both of us, I feel I was able to tell him how much he meant to me, how much I owed to him, how I pass on his words of wisdom to my students to whom, when they thank me at the end of the semester, I say, "Don't thank me, thank Bill Dickey, he was the master teacher from whom I learned everything I know." Bill Dickey's last book, *In The Dreaming*, was published by the University of Arkansas Press. Buy it in celebration of the man and his life's works.

—Christopher Hewitt

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Reviews: The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me by David Drake; Chroma by Derek Jarman; Interview with William Parker; Interview with Edward Field; Tribute: Remembering a Poet, William Dickey

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